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ABSTRACT

Just as a contemporary professional person maintains copies of wills, real estate records, and court decrees, so did 15th-century B.C. residents of the ancient city of Nuzi. Such documents, then and now, are generally written by legal scribes. The Hittites of the 14th century B.C. maintained detailed manuals concerning the care and feeding of their horses. A Hittite birth ritual text refers to other texts in its descriptions of how women were to be prepared for giving birth. Considered by modern Egyptologists as among the greatest literary works of all time is Egypt's "The Report about the Dispute of a Man with His Ba," from 2000 B.C. It concerns a man's discussion with his own soul or spirit. The dispute is about the existence of life after death; it is metaphoric, self-referential, and searches for meaning in both life and death. The script is hieratic and phonetic. Recent reinterpretations have cast doubt on the common perception that the scientific inquiry that occurred in Greece was significantly more profound than that ongoing in China at the same time. In addition, analysts now doubt that alphabetic writing produces more logical thinking than does syllabic script, or that writing gives rise to "mentalities" that do not exist in non-literate cultures. It has even been asserted that conceptions of oral/literate dichotomies in thinking arose to distance European culture from Black or Semitic historical influences. Archaeological evidence disputes the belief that cultures outside of or previous to Athenian culture were primarily oral and hence incapable of the same kinds of cultural achievement of societies that used alphabetic phonetic scripts instead of syllabic phonetic scripts. (A photostat of a portion of the "Report about the dispute of a Man with His Ba" is attached.) (SB)

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Orality and Literacy—the Real Difference: A Historical Perspective

by Gary N. Cox

A paper presented at CCCC Cincinnati, March 20, 1992

I would like to share with you some texts that I think are illustrative of certain characteristics of orality and literacy differences as they are currently defined. The first group of texts I would like to discuss were collected in the library of a suburban private home. They are mostly records of real estate transactions, employment contracts, land leases, records of lawsuits, court decrees, wills, promissory notes and the like. I found them interesting because they appeared as a group to be very like the documents found in my own desk file at my home.

Another reason I found them interesting is that the texts date from the middle of the 15th Century B.C., from the ruins of a house in the ancient city of Nuzi, written in the Hurrian language in Akkadian cuneiform. They were interesting because unlike the model of ancient literacy I carried around with me, they are the private documents of a family that lived outside a palace or temple. I thought that literacy before the democratizing of the alphabet in Athens was restricted to palace or temple scribes —and that texts produced before Athens were examples of "scribal literacy" restricted to an elite of the temple or the palace.

Many of the documents were letters to people engaged in the family business—raising livestock, trade in commodities, calls for the payment of loans or requests for extensions. Some were also marriage agreements, detailing dowries or specific assignments of properties. As I pulled up the texts from the file drawer in my desk, where I keep my most important family documents, I found real estate transactions, a promissory note, various contracts for the sale of livestock (I used to raise purebred dogs), court documents related to an estate administration, copies of employment contracts, a marriage license, a divorce decree, an adoption decree, a will, and various deeds to property.

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In the case of the Pui-tae, son of Wullu, all of the documents were written by a scribe. The excavations of this area of Nuzi have revealed that the community was served by a group of about 35 practicing scribes. The scribes tended to serve the same families, although certain scribes specialized in certain kinds of documents. The documents are signed by the scribes, and display the seals of the authors or owners of the documents. Legal, or court, documents have further seals to attest to their legality/authenticity.

In the case of Gary, son of Hoyt, well, all my documents were written by scribes, too. Whereas in case of Pui-tae, the signature of the scribe came in a segment of the tablet at the end known as the "colophon;" in my documents, my legal scribe's colophon came as a separate page, usually at the beginning. Sometimes when one of my legal scribe's assistant scribes wrote the document for him, the assistant scribe's initials appear in code in a small colophon in the lower left corner of the full-page colophon. It was common in Nuzi, and other literate cultures of the 15th Century B.C., for scribes to employ other scribes with specialized training to write texts for them. It is also common practice now for scribes, even highly trained scribes like me, to hire legal scribes to write certain documents for them.

The document that intrigued me the most was Pui-tae's will. In it, he adopted his three daughters as sons, making them his legal heirs. Because Nuzi society was patrilinear, and some of his property had come to him on the death of his father, his daughters' claims on that property might have been challenged by Pui-tae's brothers or nephews. By giving his daughters status as sons, he protected their rights to all the property he had, not only that which he acquired himself. Further, other documents show that Pui-tae's daughters were all adopted, still more reason to give them the legal protection as sons and heirs.[1]

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[1] Jonathon Paradise. " Daughters as Sons at Nuzi." in M. A. Morrison and D. I. Owens, eds., *Studies on the Civilization and Culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians in Honor of Ernest R. Lachman, Vol. 2.* Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 1981, 203-213.

My own will also wrestles the the problems of adopted and natural children and property of various sources. I feel a real affinity for Pui-tae of Nuzi, even though 3500 years separate us and he is allegedly a primary oral man and I am a textually literate one.

The next texts I want to discuss are somewhat more current. They date from the mid 14th Century B.C. One is a manual for training chariot horses by a Hittite horse trainer named Kikkuli. The other is a manual for performing Hittite birth rituals. Both are from the archives discovered at the great fortress palace of the Hittite empire at Bogaz Köy, in central Anatolia (Turkey). In the former, Kikkuli lays out a six month training regimen for the conditioning of chariot horses. This would have been a matter of the greatest state interest because the primary technology of warfare at the time, one at which the Hittites excelled, was that of use of the war chariot, drawn by two horses and carrying a driver and two bowmen. Success in battle could very well depend on the quality and conditioning of the horses on which Hittite warfare relied. The manual is quite detailed; including everything from how the horses are to be fed, when they are to be fed, and when and how they are exercised. The following is an excerpt from the manual:

> These are the words of Kikkulis, master horseman from the land of . . . Mittani.
>
> When the groom takes the horses to pasture in the spring, he harnesses them and makes them pace three leagues and gallop two furlongs. On the way back they are to run three furlongs. He unharnesses them, rubs them down, and waters them, then leads them into the stable and gives them each a handful of clover, two handfuls of barley, and one handful of of chopped green grass, mixed together. When they have eaten all up, they are to be picketed. . .
>
> Day Five. Pace two leagues, run twenty furlongs out and thirty furlongs home. Put rugs on. After sweating, give one pail of salted water and one pail of malt water. Take to the river and wash down. Swim horses. Take to stable and give further pail of malted water. Wash and swim again. Give handful of grass. Wash and swim again. Feed at night one

bushel boiled grain with chaff.[2]

There are 184 days of instructions in this manual characterized by constant changes in when horses exercise and when they eat as well as by constant changes in gaiting and distances. Such irregularity may have been designed to simulate conditions in the field where an anticipated routine might not have been possible. So the horses and, I suspect, the human members of the military would be able to function at maximum efficiency under whatever conditions they encountered.

This text was particularly interesting because of something I read in Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy (1976)*[3] a few years before:

> An oral culture likewise has nothing corresponding to how to do it manuals for trades (such manuals in fact are extremely rare and always crude even in chirographic cultures, coming into existence only after print has been considerably interiorized (43).

Recall that Kikkuli's manual was written in mid 14th century B.C., about a hundred years earlier than when those allegedly primary oral Greeks attacked and sacked Troy, an event which archaeologists now date at about 1250 B.C.

Another text which I will touch on briefly is a Hittite Birth ritual, also unearthed from the archives at Bogaz Köy and from the same period as Kikkuli's manual. The most astonishing thing about this text, other than its authorship by a Hittite midwife of that period, is its references to other texts in its descriptions of how women were to be prepared for giving birth. I cite the following example:

But when the woman gives birth, and while the seventh day

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[2] Robert Drews. *The Coming of the Greeks*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, 84, citing A. A. Dent. *The Horse through Fifty Years of Civilization*, New York: Phaidon, 1974, 57.

[3] New York: Methuen.

> after birth is passing, then they perform the *mala* offering of the new born [...] on that seventh day. Further, if a male child is born, in whatever month he is born—whether one day or three three days remain—then from that month they count off. And when the third month arrives, then the male child with *kunzigannahit* they cleanse. For the seers are expert with the *kunzigannahit*, and it to [...] they offer. But if a female child is born, then from that month they count off. But when the fourth month arrives, then the female child with *kunzigannahit* they cleanse.
>
> But when it is time for the festival of the womb—that is at the time when she gives birth—how they perform the festival—it is written up as a *kurta* tablet and it is from Kizzawatna. And I do not know the festival orally by heart, but rather I will fetch it from there. [4]

There are two other places where the author of this tablet cites other texts: "And how for them they perform the festival there is the contents of another tablet" and later, "this material, too, is the contents of another tablet." I submit this is a 14th Century B.C. example of an in-text citation of another textual source, one of the world's earliest footnotes, if you will.

The final text is perhaps the most intriguing of those I will discuss. The text is called *The Report About the Dispute of a Man With his* ***Ba***. It is interesting for a number of reasons. First of all it was written about 2000 B.C. The script is hieratic, which is the ancient Egyptian cursive script for hieroglyphics. It is phonetic, as are all the writing systems used in the texts I've been discussing. The composition was well known in ancient Egyptian times and regarded as a literary masterpiece. Modern Egyptologists consider it one of the greatest literary works of all time. In it a man has a dialogue with his *Ba*, sometimes translated as "soul" or "spirit" although the exact meaning of *Ba* is not entirely clear. The dispute is about the existence of life after death. It is metaphoric, self-referential, and searches for meaning in both life and death. In short, it seems to me, it is literary and textual in any sense (including

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[4] Gary Beckman, *Hittite Birth Rituals. Series: Studien zu den Bogazkoy-Texten 29.* Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983, 137.)

print) that that one wishes to define it. It predates Athens by 1500 years and print culture by nearly four millennia.

I have a transparency of a photograph of the papyrus scroll on which it was written so that you can read it along with me.[5] These are lines 64 through 78. The piece has 135 lines.

> [55]Then my ba opened its mouth to me [56] while it answered what I had said: "If you talk of burying— [57] it is pangs of the heart and it is a bringing of tears without [58] saddening the (dead) man. It is the taking of a man from his house which remains deserted on the [59] high ground. Never will you go forth above while you [60] see daylight! The builders in [61] granite had constructed and completed pyramid and equipment in [62] goodly work—when the builders became [63] gods (i.e. died), their offering-stones were bare like (those of the) weary ones [64] *who are dead on the river-bank for lack of a procurator; [65] while the waves take their toll and the sunrays [66] theirs likewise; the fishes tell them [67] the edges of the water. You should hearken to me! Behold, it is good for men to hearken! [68] Follow the happy time and forget care!*
>
> *The first Parable of the Ba*
>
> *When a commoner [69] has tilled his plot, he has stocked up his harvest-due [70] for the boat of the administration. He anticipates the journey [71] and that his accounting has come; (even) when he sees the coming up of darkness [72] [connected] with the north-breeze, he still watches for the ship. [73] While the sun sets and comes up (again). and (meanwhile) his wife [74] and his children perished on a plot infested by night[75] with crocodiles. When finally he is settled (again), [76] he will take part in shouting, saying: "I would not weep [77] . . .for that woman—so there is for her no more an escape from the West [78]* than for another on earth. I grieve about her children, [79] who were crushed *in ovo,* as they saw the face of Death, [80] before they had lived."[6]

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[5] The italicized text corresponds to lines 64 through 78 of the original papyrus reproduced in Appendix A . I have included lines of text that precede and follow the text shown in the photograph.

[6] Hans Goedicke. *The Report about the Dispute of a Man with His BA: Papyrus Berlin 3024.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970, 211-217.

Finally, I mention four works of the last decade that are relevant to the textual evidence I have reviewed here. In 1979, G. E. R Lloyd published *Magic, Reason, and Experience: Studies in the Origins and Development of Greek Science*,[7] in which he attempted, using extant textual evidence from the period, to verify the radical shift in thinking (i.e. mentality) asserted by social anthropologists and classicists like Goody and Havelock to have occurred in Greece. But Lloyd could not find that such a change had taken place. In fact, Lloyd rejected the idea that the scientific inquiry that occurred in Greece was significantly more unique or profound or propositional in content than that which occurred in China at about the same time.

John DeFrancis in *Visible Speech: The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems*, published in 1989,[8] rejects notions that alphabetic writing systems produce more logical thinking than syllabic scripts. He contends that all fully developed writing systems are phonetic, whether ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic, Chinese characters, cuneiform, or Korean hangul, and asserts that any differences in consciousness and cultural achievement attributed to differences in script, such as the differences between the Greek alphabet and cuneiform, for example, is insupportable from a linguistic point of view.

In 1991, in *Demystifying Mentalities*,[9] Lloyd flatly rejected the existence of "mentalities" produced by differences in written script or any other single determinate factor. His book was a reaction to social anthropological views, such as Julian Jaynes' in particular, that ancient, oral man's brain was split into bicameral halves with little integration. Such integration, according to Jaynes, did not occur until alphabetic script introduced an integration of the halves. Until then, ancient, oral man heard the right side of the brain talking to the left and interpreted the voice as the voice of god. Such bicamerality, alleges Jaynes, caused a mystical, visionary form of thinking as opposed to the

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7 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

8 Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

9 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

scientific, abstract thinking available from "literate" brains that read and write an alphabetic script.

In Lloyd's view, cultures are too complex to label their ways of dealing with problems as "mentalities" and he rejects the notion that the term "oral mentality" has any validity.

And finally, in *Black Athena* (1987),[10] Martin Bernal levels a most serious charge about the motivation for the creation of the oral/literate dichotomies of thinking—that they are the result, partly at least, of white, Aryan racist attempts to isolate and distance European culture from Black or Semitic historical influence.

I think it would be useful to study the enormous textual legacy of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds that preceded and surrounded Classical Greece. But I think it is necessary to drop the prior assumption that those worlds outside of Athens and previous to Athens were something called **oral**, and that therefore their writing, culture, and thinking must have been something called **oral**, too; in other words, incapable of the same kinds of cultural achievement of societies that used alphabetic phonetic scripts instead of syllabic phonetic scripts.

I think we could learn more from that rich legacy of texts using instead the model suggested by John DeFrancis, that all writing systems are capable of expressing the human needs of their inventors—and in fact do, rather than the model of the past three decades that the only literate societies are those with a Greek alphabet and that the others are all at some lesser stage of orality —primary, preliterate, protoliterate, or craft literate. I suggest to you the historical evidence says otherwise.

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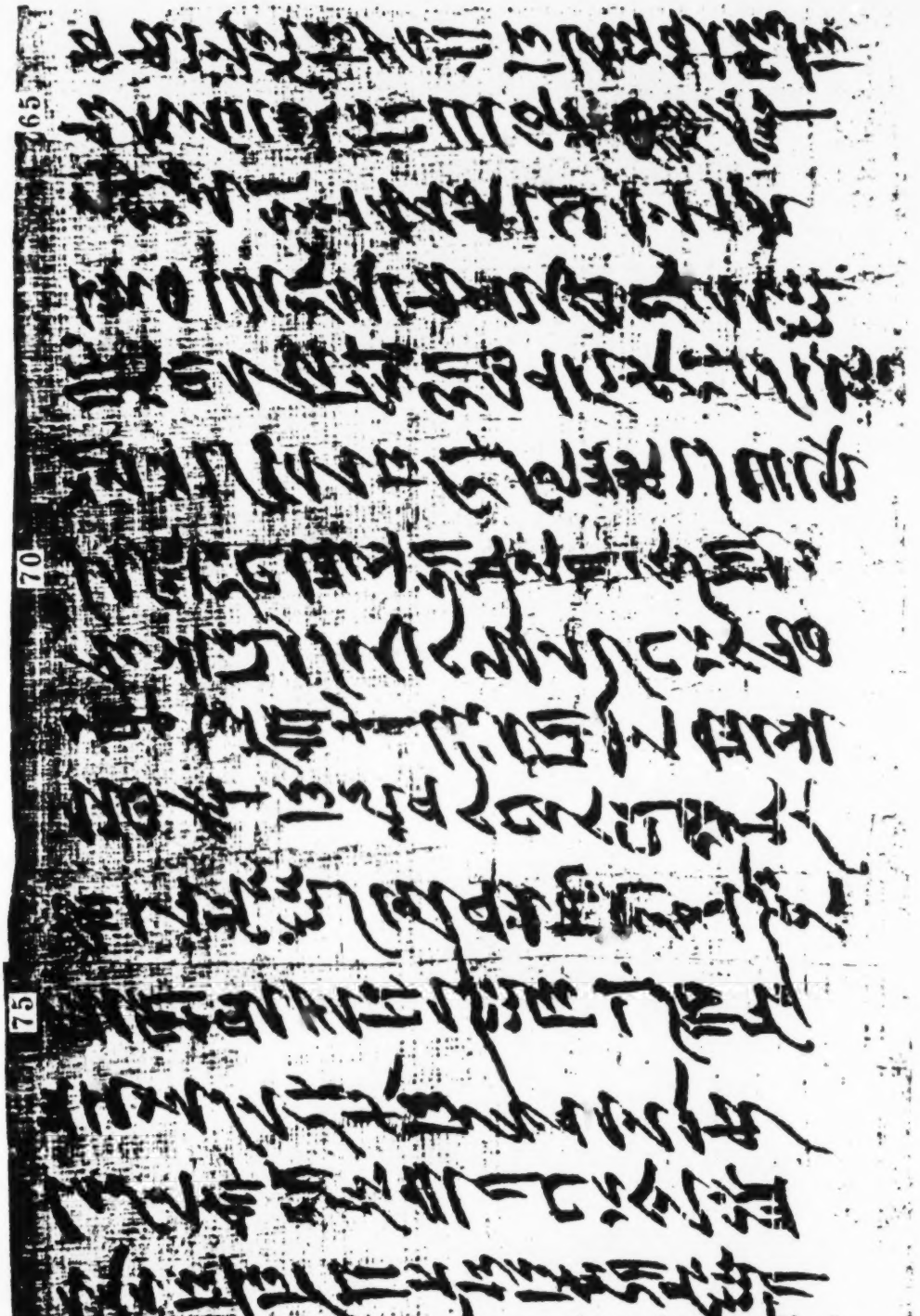
[10] New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Appendix A



Reproduced from Goedicke, Hans. *The Report about the Dispute of a Man with His Ba: Papyrus Berlin 3024.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970.

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